James Bryan Smith tells a story from his elementary school days. There was a kid in his class. His name was Mike, but the kids called him Fatty. They teased him and taunted him about his size. He was picked last for every team and was the only one in the class who never got a valentine from another kid.

One day in junior high, Mike sat behind Smith in gym class. Someone pushed Mike and he fell on Smith. The kid who pushed Mike said that Mike started it. Wanting to keep up his tough guy image, Smith challenged Mike: “Come on, man, let’s fight.” Mike didn’t want to but peer pressure forced him into it. He reluctantly raised his fists, and Smith punched him right in the nose. The gym teacher arrived about that time and set the punishment by telling the boys to go run a mile around the track.

But the gym teacher added a little twist to the punishment. “I want you to run the mile holding hands.” The class laughed out loud. Embarrassed, Mike and Smith went to the track to run the mile. Smith writes:

It was sometime on that cinder track that I remember looking at him, with his bloody nose and rotund body, and realizing that he was a person. We looked at each other and laughed. We actually became good friends.¹

This story had a happy ending. But I wish I could tell you that these kinds of things only happen in junior high schools or among children or in jail or maybe in some local bar. But people can get crossways with one another and hurt one another pretty deeply in families and even in the church. Maybe no punches are thrown, but people in the church can forget that others are real persons with real feelings, and we can hurt each other in ways that are hard to overcome. We can get crossways with each other. And our personal tiffs can hurt the church.

That was going on in the church at Philippi. As we conclude our series, *Being Church Together*, I invite you to open your Bible to *Philippians 4:1-3*. We’ve been thinking together these three Sundays about church unity. We’re

I

Imagine the scene ... the church at Philippi has gathered for Sunday worship. There is an air of excitement as they gather because they've been told that Paul wrote them a letter and that one of the church leaders will be reading it in worship. But the excitement over hearing Paul’s letter is tempered a bit by an ongoing conflict in the church. It seems two of the church’s prominent, hard working women, Euodia and Syntyche, have fallen out with each other. The conflict has been going on for some time. The two women are mad at each other, and they refuse to reconcile. Not only that, but as is the case in most church conflicts, people who knew about the conflict began to take sides. Maybe the conflict was so intense that some would have left the church had there been another church town. Thankfully, there were enough good things going on in the church at Philippi that the conflict could not ruin the church as a whole. But it did take a toll. Destructive conflict always takes a toll. It wounds the spirit of a church. It distracts the church from its primary mission. It hurts the witness of the church as church members talk about the conflict in public with folks who are not even a part of the church. Destructive conflict always takes a toll.

Apprently, Paul got wind of it when Epaphroditus, just fresh from Philippi, visited Paul in his jail cell. Maybe that’s why Paul addresses church unity in this letter. Early he reminds the church of the ties that bind them together. In chapter 2 he drives home the kind of behavior that makes for unity, a behavior modeled after Jesus who put others’ interests ahead of his own and became a servant to us all. “Act like that,” writes Paul. It sort of makes me wonder if Paul didn’t say all that with Euodia and Syntyche in mind, if he didn’t write all that to set up his comments here in chapter 4. He’s been writing in general terms but here in chapter 4 he gets very, very specific.
Can you see it? On this Sunday morning as they gather in the house for church, Euodia and her supporters are sitting on one side of the room. Syntyche and her supporters are sitting on the other. And as they are listening to Paul’s letter and his call for the church to "stand firm" and to live in unity and humility, I suspect Euodia was thinking, "I hope Syntyche is listening to this. Lord knows, she sure needs to hear it." And I suspect on the other side of the room, Syntyche was thinking to herself, "I hope Euodia is listening to this. Lord knows, she sure needs to hear it."

And in the midst of such prideful posturing over their positions in the conflict, Paul quits circling the runway and makes a direct landing on these two women. He calls them by name: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." Whoa! Talk about a quick way to wake up a sleeping congregation and get some immediate attention—this would do it! Have you ever been in a worship service when the preacher stopped in the middle of his sermon and said to some kids, "Hey, you—that’s right you, Tommy and Phil—do you mind? Would you pipe down so I can finish my sermon without all the distraction?" I’ve never done it, but I’ve seen it done. And if you’ve seen something like that, then you understand and feel something of the tension that is created when specific names are called out and bad behavior is pointed out right in the middle of church. I suspect whoever was reading Paul’s letter that Sunday in Philippi, probably paused and swallowed real hard before he read this line: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord." No doubt every eye in the place turned to look at these two ladies. A most embarrassing moment, to be sure. Did they blush? Did they get mad? Did they slouch in their seats and droop their heads in shame? We don’t know. All we know is what Paul wrote: "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord."

II

We don’t know what their conflict was about. Paul never tells us that. All we know is that it was causing problems in the church. Here were two women who had been faithful leaders in the church, faithful servants of the Lord, faithful workers in contending for the cause of Christ right alongside Paul and Clement and the others. And now they were at odds with each other. And their conflict was hurting the church.
Probably, their conflict was interpersonal in nature. Maybe it was a disagreement over the way something should be done in the church. Maybe it was over something that happened outside of the church. Maybe one of them said something hurtful to the other. Maybe one was envious of the other. Who knows? Paul doesn’t say. Which is a good thing—because that makes this so very applicable to us.

People in the church, I'm embarrassed to say, can easily get caught up in all sorts of petty, interpersonal conflicts and struggles. Churches have been known to fight over the color of the carpet on the floor, the color of the paint on the walls, and over which side of the platform to put the piano on. Others in the church get angry with one another over their politics outside of the church and say hurtful things to them or about them within the church. I have heard of more than one Sunday School class who revolted in anger when asked to consider moving to a new room. Still others in the church who run the same kind of business may get at odds with each other over competition they have in the community. Some get crossways with fellow church members because they feel slighted by them. Others get upset over the way someone dresses or who gets to sing the solo or who gets to lead some committee or team or over the fact that some leader didn’t pick a member’s kid for some part in a play or a musical. A lot of us bruise pretty easily. Honestly, if the church was hemophiliac, most churches would have bled to death long ago. We are people after all. We are flawed, we are broken, we are pretty thin-skinned more often than not. And people who have contended with one another in the cause of the gospel, people who have been good friends for years, can end up just like Euodia and Syntyche—in conflict in the church over things that have little if anything to do with the main mission and purpose of the church.

So we don’t know exactly what the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche was about. All we know is that it was hurting the church. And Paul makes clear in his appeal to these women that whatever their conflict is about and as important as it may seem to them, it's not more important than unity in the church. Few things are.

III

So notice how Paul tries to resolve this conflict and move the church toward unity. Maybe it would have helped had he made them run a
mile together while holding hands. But Paul didn’t go with that strategy. He had other ideas.

First, he appeals directly to both of the women: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.” The word the NIV uses here is a good translation—plead. Unity is so vital to the church that Paul does not mind humbling himself to the point of practically begging these women to pull together and agree in the Lord. The word is a strong word and a most earnest appeal: "I urge, I exhort, I beg, I plead." It's a strong word of appeal Paul makes here.

And notice that he makes it to both women equally. He uses the word twice. "I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche." Paul is not interested in choosing sides in this conflict. As he writes in v. 1, he loves and longs for them all. Nor is he interested in rehashing the conflict. That’s why Paul wastes no words to sum up their rival claims. He does not say to one or the other, "You are wrong; you must apologize." He does not sit on the fence and say, "There are two sides to every story; you are both partly right and partly wrong. So kiss and make up." This is not a matter of who’s right and who’s wrong or what rightness or wrongness exists on each side. Paul’s plea is made to both contestants alike. No doubt each woman said, "I am right, and she is wrong," but to Paul, each was under the same obligation to make the first move to get the conflict resolved.²

So Paul directly appeals to the women themselves to do their Christian duty and work out the conflict with each other. It won’t be easy. It’s never easy to right wrong relationships. It means we have to swallow our pride. It means we have to humble ourselves. It means we have to forgive those who have wronged us. It means we have to take the first step in healing the breach and bridging the gap. It’s never easy. But it is Christian. When it comes to interpersonal conflicts in the church, the only winner Paul is interested in seeing is the church. So Paul appeals to the women themselves.

Then, he appeals to the church. Listen to v. 3: "Yes, and I ask you, loyal yoke-fellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel." We don’t know who this “yoke-fellow” is that Paul asks to help resolve this conflict. It may have been an individual, but then again, as many

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scholars believe, it may very well have been the whole church. In unity, the church is one. And certainly the church as a whole can help resolve conflict in the church.

One way the church can help resolve such conflicts is to refuse to be a party to it. Generally, when people are hurt or angry, they try to pull others into the fight even when they don’t know there’s anything to fight about. When Paul was in Ephesus, a great conflict erupted over his ministry. The more people came to Christ, the less idols the craftsmen could sell, so they incited a riot to lynch Paul. The crowd grew. The shouting was intense. And as Luke tells us in his account of this in Acts 19:32, "Most of the people did not even know why they were there." I’ve heard of a lot of church conflicts like that—business meetings that usually draw 75 draw 300 for the big vote. We like to draw others into our conflict. We want others to fight for us. We have a tendency to do that because it’s hard to fight alone, and we want some kind of justification for our position that numbers appear to bring. It’s a conflict game people play called, "Let’s you and him fight." We play it in church, in the family, and even at work—"Let’s you and him fight." People try to pull us in and stir us up, and many times people who are not even a part of the conflict get the most involved in stirring up anger toward one another. So if you want to be the yoke-fellow that Paul writes about here, if someone tries to get you in a potential church conflict, just refuse to play along because both you and the church have bigger fish to fry.

And that awareness is another way the church can help resolve conflicts between her people. As a church, we can focus on our mission and our purpose. In this church we call that mission caring for God, for others, and for the world. In this text Paul calls it "contending in the cause of the gospel." Nothing else is more important than that. That’s what we’re about as a church. That’s why God has us here. Conflict can only take us away from that purpose and siphon off energies needed to do gospel work. We need to come together around a common cause. Never underestimate the power of the common cause. It was the common cause of defeating Hitler that brought democratic America and communist Russia together as allies in World War II. It’s the common cause of defeating terrorism that has brought numerous countries together to share intelligence and do battle against the evil-doers. It’s the common cause of impacting for Christ the Russian city of Alapaevsk that brought us Baptists and some local Pentecostals together for the common good. And it’s the common cause of reaching, discipling, and ministering to people in the name of Christ that can bring people in the church together
regardless of our race, our socio-economics, our politics, or any other allegiances we hold dear. Focusing on our mission and refusing to get off that focus helps resolve conflict and build unity.

Isn’t that what that gym teacher did in Smith’s story? He had Mike and Smith run the mile holding hands so the focus would move from self to team, from personal issues to team mission. Teamship around the mission builds unity. The church can focus on mission and help warring parties do the same.

And the church can do something else too. We can help conflicting parties see how much they have in common. As Paul so poignantly writes, Euodia and Syntyche had been faithful laborers and friends in the work of the gospel. They had served side-by-side. There is more to unite them than there is to divide them. And as a church we need to remind conflicting parties about that. We can get along and pull together in spite of our differences when we agree on the main things of the gospel and the faith. Rupertus Meldinius, an obscure German writer and conciliatory theologian of the 17th Century once wrote these words. They are good words for us all: "In necessary things unity, in unnecessary things liberty, in all things charity." Not a bad motto, huh? I think Paul would have liked it too.

IV

During a Vacation Bible School class one day, a new student was brought in right in the middle of class. It was a little boy who only had one arm. The teacher had no time to learn about the details of why the boy was that way, but she immediately began to worry that she or one of the kids might say or do something that would make the boy feel more conspicuous than he probably already felt.

Well, the class went along very smoothly and nobody had done anything to make the boy feel uncomfortable. So as the class came to a close, the teacher began to relax. She asked the kids to join her in their usual closing ceremony. "Okay," she said, "let's make churches. Here's the church and here's the steeple, open the doors and there's...." And boom! The thought suddenly struck her like a bus—a one-armed boy can’t do this exercise. The very thing she feared that the children would do, she did herself.
As she stood there speechless, the little girl sitting next to the boy reached over with her left hand, placed it on his right hand, and said, "Come on, David, let's make the church together."

And that's what Paul is saying to the church today: "Come on, in spite of our differences, in spite of our blunders, in spite of our personality conflicts, in spite of all of our handicaps that could divide us or get us off the track of our mission, for the sake of the gospel, for the glory of Christ, let's join hands and make the church together."

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John S. McCallum II